

DINING

Birmingham's Avant Garde specializes in alternative dining

By ELEANOR HEALD
SPECIAL WRITER

On the first full day of summer, alternative dining entered the Birmingham restaurant scene in the location vacated by Oliverio's. Avant Garde borrows flavors of Asian, Indian, Italian, French, Southwest and Mediterranean foods and creates meatless dishes, prepared with neither oils nor dairy.

The alternative food idea, conceived by Chef Luis Cartagena and his partner Elaine Pitzer, is an outgrowth of their personal eating habits over the last three years.

"I had the confidence to open this style restaurant after Whole Foods bought the Merchant of Vine," Cartagena said. "They did my advance marketing."

"Now, I can honestly tell people that I cook with the same good-tasting products they can buy at Merchant of Vine-Whole Foods. Non-fat salad dressing is no longer without good taste. You don't need dairy to make a great sauce."

Chef Luis is on a mission to turn diners onto healthier eating. "Avant Garde will give diners something they've not had before and a new way to experience healthier food," Cartagena said. "The concept will work in the art-friendly, downtown atmosphere of Birmingham. It wouldn't work as a free-standing restaurant or in a strip mall."

This statement echoes the way avant garde is dictionary defined as "those, especially in the arts, who create, produce or apply new, original or experimental ideas, designs and techniques."

Avant Garde
Where: 126 S. Old Woodward, Birmingham., (248) 594-4499.
Hours: Monday to Wednesday 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m.; Thursday to Saturday until 11 p.m.
Menus: Exceptionally flavorful, cutting-edge alternative dishes made without red meat, oils or dairy. Same menu for lunch and dinner.
Cost: Starters, sandwiches and salads \$5-8; main dishes all under \$16.
Reservations: Not accepted.
Credit cards: All majors accepted.

Chef Luis plans to live up to this definition. At Avant Garde, alternative dining can be experienced in a contemporary environment with white tablecloths and flowers on the table. This ambience was born out of Chef Luis' quest for equity. He did nearly all the work himself, from stripping and painting the walls to cutting the glass for decorative ceiling lights.

Thirty-two-year-old Chef Luis learned his trade on the job, beginning to work in restaurants at age 15. By age 18, he owned his own pizzeria. He developed his interest in alternative foods as food and beverage director of Good Food Company. Before starting the Avant Garde project, he was food and beverage director for Vick's World Class Markets. Chef Luis predicted the Vegetabile Quenadilla, with veggies sandwiched between lawash with soy Monterey Jack cheese and fruit salsa, to be a top-selling appetizer. He also pointed proudly to the Stuffed Portabella Mushrooms that incorporate house burrito mix and peppers.

If you like burritos and would like to ditch the fat, then the

Vegetarian Burrito sandwich is a great choice. It's mesquite-grilled veggies wrapped in sun-dried tomato lawash. It's taco seasoning taste and the flavor of refried beans all the way, without either the beans or the fat. Among entrees, the predicted smash hits are the ravioli selections. There's salmon, duck, lobster and turkey, each prepared with a grand array of flavors. The salmon raviolis come with a cointreau cream; duck is flavored with Wards Port sauce; lobster gets turned up with amaretto tomato sauce; while the turkey has sun-dried cranberry sauce.

You can create your own pizza with organic spelt (low gluten wheat flour) crust, tomato sauce, two toppings and a mix of soy cheeses.

While there's not a kid's menu as such, the noodle dishes, harvest burger, chicken selections, raviolis and pizza will appeal to kids.

Avant Garde does not have a liquor license. The best shot in the house is grass green Wheat Grass made in the juicer. Other beverages include choices of fresh juices (carrot, apple or beet) made to order, and organic



What's for dinner: Chef Luis Cartagena presents Eggplant Lasagna with fresh tomato to basil garlic sauce and rolled pasta at Avant Garde.

Kona coffee. Cartagena concluded that he's on a mission of good health and spiritual harmony.

"Adjusting your diet at any age will make you feel better," he contended. "I'm also reaching out to people with cardiac prob-

lems and those on restricted diets. They can now get a fine dining atmosphere without fear of salt and high fat."

RESTAURANT SPECIALS

Restaurant Specials features restaurant openings and renovations, menu specials, and anniversaries. Send announcements to: Entertainment Editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspaper, Inc., 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150 or fax (734) 591-7279.

THE MOOSE PRESERVE
Presents Animal House '98, annual summer Toga party, Thursday-Friday, July 23-24.

2395 Woodward Ave. (just north of Square Lake Road) Bloomfield. Admission is free. Live entertainment with a.m. 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. Call (248) 868-6888 for details.

MICHIGAN BREWERS GUILD SUMMER FESTIVAL
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by local Michigan brewpubs will be sold at nominal charge. Advance tickets available at Merchant's Fine Wine locations and all 33 Michigan Brewers Guild Breweries and at the door.

Call (248) 628-6584 or (248) 546-7770 for information.
TOO CHEZ
Everything's Coming Up Rose - Wine tasting 7 p.m. Monday, July 27 at Too Chez restaurant, on the patio, 27155 Sheraton

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